

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 01079 070754Z

12

ACTION NEA-16

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FM USINT DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 772

INFO AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI

USINT ALGIERS

AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM

AMEMBASSY KUWAIT

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY MOGADISCIO

AMEMBASSY MOSCOW

AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY RABAT

AMEMBASSY ROME

AMEMBASSY SANAA

AMEMBASSY TEHRAN

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

AMEMBASSY TUNIS

USMISSION GENEVA

USUN NEW YORK 46

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 1079

BEIRUT PASS BAGHDAD

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PAGE 02 DAMASC 01079 070754Z

KUWAIT PASS MUSCAT

GENEVA FOR MEPC DEL

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT SY

SUBJ: SEVEN DAYS FROM SHUTTLE THIRTEEN

1. A WEEK HAS PASSED SINCE SECRETARY KISSINGER LEFT DAMASCUS AFTER HIS 13TH SHUTTLE TO THE CITY WHICH FINALLY RESULTED IN A SUCCESSFUL SYRIAN-ISRAELI DISENGAGEMENT. DURING THIS TIME WE HAVE HAD AMPLE OCCASION TO SPEAK TO A VARIETY OF SYRIANS AND DIPLOMATIC CONTACTS IN ORDER TO ASCERTAIN THE IMPACT ON PUBLIC OPINION HERE OF THE DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT. THERE IS NO DOUBT THAT LOCAL REACTION TO THE AGREEMENT HAS BEEN OVERWHELMINGLY FAVORABLE. ALTHOUGH FOR THE FIRST FEW DAYS WE HEARD THERE WAS SOME OPPOSITION TO IT COMING FROM "PALESTINIANS, COMMUNISTS AND OPPONENTS OF THE REGIME," ALL OUR CONTACTS AGREE THAT THIS OPPOSITION IS MINUSCULE AND UNIMPORTANT. ALL PERSONS WHOM WE HAVE SPOKEN TO, BOTH SYRIAN AND NON-SYRIAN, HAVE BEEN LAVISH IN THEIR PRAISE OF THE SECRETARY'S STAMINA, PERSISTENCE AND UNDERSTANDING IN ACHIEVING WHAT MIGHT BE CHARACTERIZED AS A SIGNIFICANT AND MAJOR PSYCO-POLITICAL BREAKTHROUGH NOT ONLY IN SYRIAN-U.S. RELATIONS BUT IN ARAB-U.S. RELATIONS AS WELL. AS ONE HIGH-RANKING SYRIAN ARMY OFFICER TOLD ME, SYRIA AND THE UNITED STATES ARE NOW "WALKING AND TALKING TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME IN ALMOST A QUARTER OF A CENTURY." HE CONTINUED THAT THIS IN ITSELF REPRESENTS A MAJOR SUCCESS FOR U.S. POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST.

2. ALTHOUGH IT IS GENERALLY BELIEVED IN THE CITY THAT PRESIDENT ASAD MADE ALL THE BASIC AND FINAL DECISIONS CONCERNING DISENGAGEMENT, MANY PEOPLE ALSO POINT TO THE FACT THAT FOLLOWING THE ACTUAL AGREEMENT WITH THE SECRETARY ON MAY 29, ASAD THEN EMBARKED ON A SERIES OF MEETINGS AND CONSULTATIONS WITH VARIOUS GROUPS AND ORGANIZATIONS IN THE CITY. THE LOCAL PRESS REPORTED FOR EXAMPLE ON MAY 31 THAT THE REGIONAL BAATH PARTY UNANIMOUSLY APPROVED THE DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT. ALTHOUGH NOT REPORTED IN THE PRESS, IT IS ALSO RUMORED THAT RIFAT ASAD, THE PRESIDENT'S BROTHER
CONFIDENTIAL

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 03 DAMASC 01079 070754Z

AND COMMANDER OF THE "DEFENSE REGIMENT" HAD SEVERAL MEETINGS WITH ALL THE OFFICERS PRESENTLY IN THE CITY TO "EXPLAIN" TO THEM THE PRESIDENT'S RATIONALE FOR THE AGREEMENT. ONE RELIABLE SOURCE SAYS THAT ALL THE OFFICERS WERE "UNANIMOUSLY IN FAVOR OF THE AGREEMENT", FOLLOWING RIFAT ASAD'S "EXPLANATION."

3. WHILE MANY CONTACTS ALSO APPRECIATE THAT DISENGAGEMENT

REPRESENTS ONLY A FIRST STEP IN A LONG AND DIFFICULT ROAD, THERE IS NONETHELESS IN THE CITY A PALPABLE AIR OF EXPECTANCY. THIS ATMOSPHERE HAS BEEN FURTHER POSITIVELY CHARGED BY NEWS OF PRESIDENT NIXON'S IMMINENT ARRIVAL AS WELL AS BY REPORTS THAT THE UNITED STATES WILL BE PARTICIPATING IN THE 21TH ANNUAL DAMASCUS INTERNATIONAL FAIR FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE 1965. MANY SOUK MERCHANTS ARE REPORTEDLY NOW BRINGING OUT OF STORAGE STOCKS OF DAMASCENE HANDICRAFT WORK WHICH THEY HAD BEEN HOLDING IN RESERVE FOR "THE COMING OF THE AMERICANS." MORE IMPORTANT THAN THIS, HOWEVER, ARE STORIES OF PREPARATIONS BY BOTH PUBLIC AND PRIVATE GROUPS IN SYRIA OF PROJECTS WHICH THEY HOPE WILL ELICIT INTEREST BY AMERICAN COMPANIES. THESE INCLUDE MAJOR IRRIGATION PROJECTS, CANNING FACTORIES, AS WELL AS A SUGAR AND A WHITE CEMENT FACTORY IN DAMASCUS. ONE BUSINESSMAN, A RETIRED SYRIAN ARMY GENERAL, TOLD ME THAT SYRIANS HAVE HAD OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES EXPERIENCE IN DEALING WITH ALL THE MAJOR INDUSTRIAL COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD BOTH EASTERN AND WESTERN AND THEY HAVE CONCLUDED THAT FOR QUALITY, FOR GUARANTEED PERFORMANCE AND MORE IMPORTANTLY FOR SPARE PARTS, THE WEST IN GENERAL AND THE UNITED STATES IN PARTICULAR ARE THE NATURAL BUSINESS PARTNERS FOR SYRIA. THIS BUSINESSMAN WENT ON THAT WITH DISENGAGEMENT SYRIA CAN NOW BEGIN TO REBUILD TRADE CONNECTIONS BROKEN FOR ALMOST A DECADE.

4. AFTER A SLOW START, THE LOCAL PRESS HAS BEEN DEVOTING INCREASING ATTENTION TO THE DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT. THERE HAVE BEEN SEVERAL DETAILED ARTICLES WITH PICTURES OF THE SECRETARY AND THE PRESIDENT GIVING A BLOW-BY-BLOW SYRIAN ACCOUNT OF THE NEGOTIATIONS WHICH ONE NEWSPAPER CHARACTERIZED AS "130 LONG AND EXHAUSTING HOURS OF NEGOTIATIONS RESULTING IN THE RECUPERATION OF 663 SQUARE KILOMETERS OF SYRIAN TERRITORY." ONE MAIN THEME HAS BEEN THAT THE DISENGAGEMENT AGREEMENT

CONFIDENTIAL

PAGE 04 DAMASC 01079 070754Z

REPRESENTS A VICTORY FOR SYRIA AND FOR PRESIDENT ASAD'S POLICY OF "WAGING WAR BY MEANS OF DIPLOMACY." IN THIS CONNECTION FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, THE TWO LOCAL NEWSPAPERS ALSO RAN THE COMPLETE ACCOUNT OF PRESIDENT ASAD'S RECENT INTERVIEW WITH NEWSWEEK'S ARNAUD DE BORCHGRAVE. ALTHOUGH SLIGHTLY DOCTORED, THE INTERVIEW STOOD IN STARK CONTRAST TO THE CLICHE-RIDDEN STATEMENTS OF THE PAST.

5. AS A RESULT OF DISENGAGEMENT THERE ARE ALSO RUMORS THAT THE GOVERNMENT INTENDS AMONG OTHER THINGS TO RAISE GOVERNMENT SALARIES NOW THAT MORE FUNDS CAN BE DIVERTED FROM THE DEFENSE BUDGET. IN ADDITION THERE ARE RUMORS THAT THERE ARE FURTHER ECONOMIC LIBERALIZATION MEASURES ON THE WAY. THE REGIONAL BAATH PARTY IS ALSO SCHEDULED TO HAVE A PLENARY SESSION ON JUNE 10 AND IT IS SAID IN DAMASCUS

THAT ASAD PLANS TO CARRY OUT YET ANOTHER PURGE IN ORDER TO
MAKE IT A MORE PLIABLE INSTRUMENT OF HIS WILL. "RADICAL"
MEMBERS ARE NOW REPORTEDLY TO BE REMOVED INCLUDING THE
PRESNET DEPUTY SECRETARY GENERAL AHMAR. FINALLY,
THERE ARE RUMORS THAT THE CABINET WILL SOON BE RESHUFFLED
IN ORDER TO BRING IN MORE QUALIFIED "EXPERTS" WHO WILL BE
ABLE TO "COPE WITH" SYRIAN EFFORTS TO BEGIN ECONOMIC AND
INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT. FOREIGN MINISTER KHADDAM'S NAME
IS AGAIN MENTIONED AS ONE OF THOSE WHO WILL BE DRIPPED.
SCOTES

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